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SUBJECT: GUATEMALA LAUNCHES 2007 ELECTORAL SEASON

REF: GUATEMALA 740 AND PREVIOUS

¶1. Summary: Guatemala's 2007 electoral season officially opened on May 2, leaving four months of campaigning until general elections on September 9. A second round, if necessary, to elect the president is scheduled for November ¶4. Approximately 5.7 million citizens are registered to vote for more than 3,720 public offices at the national and local levels. End summary.

¶2. The Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) officially opened the 2007 electoral season on May 2 for national and local elections scheduled for September 9. TSE president Oscar Bolanos led the opening ceremony, which was attended by presidential pre-candidates, political leaders, local authorities, representatives of the international community, and members of organizations that will monitor the electoral process. Bolanos said that the TSE will ensure free and transparent elections and promote participation of women and youth. Pointing out that the rules are clear, he urged all candidates to commit themselves to running clean campaigns.

¶3. At stake are more than 3,720 public seats, including the office of president and vice president, 158 congressional seats, 20 seats in the Central American Parliament (plus their alternates), 332 mayors, and 3,190 city council members in 332 municipalities. Over two-thirds of the deputies in Congress are running for re-election. A dozen of the 19 registered parties have confirmed their presidential candidates and running mates. A run-off for president will take place November 4 if no candidate wins a majority of the votes during the first round.

¶4. The TSE estimates the elections will cost Q409 million (approx. USD 54 million) and involve approximately 250,000 persons, including TSE magistrates, collaborators, 120,000 national and international observers (including 150 observers from the Organization of American States), support personnel, security, logistics and communications. In compliance with the electoral law, which mandates the collaboration of government security forces and public servants in the electoral process, the PNC will deploy 19,000 agents to provide elections security, with the assistance of 13,000 military personnel, and has identified areas for heightened vigilance to prevent elections-related violence. In 284 municipalities, police patrols will secure the movements of TSE delegates and the transport of ballots. In high-crime

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regions such as Jutiapa and certain municipalities close to the capital, such as Villa Nueva, the PNC plans to reinforce security with special forces.

¶5. A process is underway to decentralize the voting process

for the first time since the 2004 reform of the electoral law, with the installation of 687 new voting centers (for a total of 15,000 voting booths nationwide) in 248 municipalities, to encourage greater participation in the political process. The Executive Branch, international observers, and magistrates of electoral tribunals in Latin America have expressed concern over the enormous logistical challenges in accessing the rural sites and installing the new centers.

¶6. With successful decentralization of polling sites, the TSE hopes for greater voter turnout this year than in past

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elections. Of the 5.1 million people who had registered to vote in the 2003 general elections, 60 percent voted. As of March 31, 5.7 million people had registered to vote this year, including 1.3 million in the 18-25 age bracket, 46 percent women, 54 percent men, 72 percent literate, and 28 percent illiterate. The TSE anticipates that 5.8 million citizens will register to vote by June 9, the registration deadline. Among those who have already registered, 558,350 persons need to clarify data or complete their registration, including 331,641 first-time registered voters who have not picked up their registration numbers.

¶7. "Mirador Electoral," a domestic NGO coalition observing the electoral process, expressed concern over political violence. A report of the Central American Institute of Political Studies (INCEP) documented 25 elections-related murders over the past year, affecting primarily the National Unity of Hope (UNE) party. The Ministry of Government has sent a letter to each political party to assess security needs for rallies and other public campaign events. As in previous elections, the GOG will not provide security for candidates until the second round.
Derham